

Navigating a Strange Culture: Nurturing New English Learners

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Goodlad's notion of "nurturing pedagogy" suggests that it is an educator's responsibility to provide an environment that encourages learning and values each student as "capable of learning"(Goodlad, n.d.) by accounting for student interests, their well being, and developmental levels. Not to be overlooked is the need to provide high-quality services for new English language learners.



Need for Attention to Second Language Issues In Education and Human Services

The prevalence of speakers of first languages other than English. American society is becoming increasingly diverse, serving children from every corner of the world. Data from the 2000 U. S. Census suggests that 40% of the nation's population will consist of people of color or who hail from different language backgrounds by 2025. Currently, at least 10% of the U.S. population speaks a primary language other than English, with the percentage approaching 50 in several states and regions, such as Texas, Florida, California, Illinois, and New York (Padolsky, 2004).

As the composition of the student population changes, educators struggle to meet new English language learners' (ELL) needs. Though numerical estimates vary, little doubt exists that the populations of the U.S. and Canada have changed rapidly over the past two decades. Conservatively, growth in the U.S. student population served under ELL services amounts to 160% over the past decade (NCELA, n.d.), with about 10.5% of the total school population speaking a primary language other than English.

Lower academic performance. Hispanic students represent the majority of the ELL population. Performance statistics for Spanish-speaking young people revealed that they are more likely to drop out of high school than their Caucasian and African American counterparts (NCELA, n.d.; see also Moore, 2001; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000); the rates are estimated at about 60% nationally, no matter how figures are calculated. Rather than decreasing, dropout rates are likely increasing as economic hard times cause school-age children to enter the work force to supplement their decreasing family income (NCELA, n.d.; NCES, 2004; Zehr, 2003). In addition to already elevated dropout rates, English language learners' limited English proficiency predicts lower performance on tests of academic achievement (Genessee et al., 2005). As of 2002, less than 20 percent of ELL students met proficiency standards (Kindler, 2002; Moore, 2001), a factor potentially exacerbating drop-out rates.

Lack of educator preparation. An NCES (1996) report suggests that less than a third of teachers teaching English language learners in public schools

had received specific ELL training. The typical amount of training documented in this study included less than a day's worth of workshop; as a result, English language learners often take classes from people assigned to them simply because the educators speak English. It is essential to provide information to teachers and other related professionals who work with these students. Helping adults working with English language learners need training that features the identification of learners' needs, acquisition of effective communication strategies (especially in the absence of interpreters), and knowledge of possible interventions that do not rely solely on students' English skills.

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Limited social services and social maladjustment. The relationship between literacy and criminal justice contacts is already well established. NCES

(1994) data indicate that one in ten incarcerated adults scored in the lowest levels of the National Adult Literacy Survey and only about half of adult prisoners have completed high school or obtained high school equivalent status. The high school drop-out rates of English language learners and students with low English proficiency status suggest that ELL students may experience greater risk for a host of social maladjustments, including criminal justice contacts. Although, at present, no specific indication exists that ELL teens are more likely to be adjudicated, lower levels of literacy attainment will probably render ELL individuals at risk for both poverty and incarceration (Greenberg, Dunleavy, Kutner, & White, 2007; NIL, 2009).

Health and wellness. In a review, Moore (2001) reports the existence of "warning signs" in the performance of Spanish-speaking ELL students, who represent the largest language minority group in the United States. Beyond the academic problems noted above, Hispanic children were less likely to have health insurance, evidencing coverage at a rate nearly 30% behind their Euro- and African American peers. Moore indicated that Spanish-speaking students presented the highest rates of generic risk, teenage pregnancies, suicide attempts, and infant mortality. With lower insured rates, their behavioral and mental health screening is bound to be neglected and the children with limited English proficiency are left with limited access to already slim social support networks.

Resources and ideas for working with ELL students and their families

Of all the resources reviewed, Cary's *Working with English Language Learners* (2007) is the most useful and accessible to professionals initiating their work with second language learners. Cary structured the text so clearly that interest in the volume will extend to readers in special education, general education, corrections, counseling, and social work. In addition to the straightforward nature of Cary's presentation, the text is designed around research-based practices.

Cary innovatively organizes *Working with English Language Learners* around ten specific questions, all in the "How do I...?" form. This approach, along with illustrative stories, makes for a lively presentation in this well-edited volume. *Working With English Language Learners* reads like a series of connected stories rather than as a textbook. Evidencing a lively sense of humor, Cary provides reflections based on his years of practice. Each chapter includes specific applications related to the initiating questions. Cary provides many tools, including assessment materials, organizational charts, and lesson templates. The questions around which the text is organized include such basic queries as the following:

- How do I find useful information on a student's cultural background?
- How do I get my reluctant speakers to speak English?
- How do I address a student's English?
- How do I support a student's first language when I do not speak the language?

Along with nurturing pedagogy, a theme that ties the volume together is authenticity. Cary advocates assessment, support of English, support of the first language, writing, and speaking via activities with immediate interest to learners. In advocating for the importance of the "outside story" and considering the student's language and cultural context, Cary notes that,

The outside story unfolds away from school and is built from a thousand and one experiences hooked to home, home country, and new country factors, including values, attitudes, worldview, family dynamics, communication style, language status, and political climate. (p. 29)

The text makes a good starting point to access a wide range of theme-based materials and to create new activities. This volume is also one of the rare books to provide a solid example of how to teach speaking (chapter 4). *Working with English Language Learners* is a complete starter kit for educators and related-service professionals wishing to launch a program for English language learners or desiring to extend their own set of interactive skills.

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Another book that teacher candidates have found useful as they develop ELL-related skills is *Sheltered Content Instruction* (Echevarria & Graves, 2007). Educators and counselors with an interest in English learners will find *Sheltered Content Instruction* thoroughly readable and clearly structured. Educators are advised to approach English learners based on a problem-solving model. Everyone on the student's team can be of assistance, though these activities will largely be undertaken by the ELL educator:

- Assess students to identify their needs
- Identify what to teach and how to teach specific language skills
- Implement interventions based on student needs and interests
- Revise the intervention when it is not successful until students show progress

ELL educators will frequently ask others working with the new English speaker for insights about English development. For professionals other than those directly responsible for ELL interventions, the third item above is the most important piece of the puzzle for working with new English speakers. The positive interventions associated with the *Reclaiming* model make superb grounds for natural communication. Helping professionals can support growth in ELL students by observing this selection of strategies (Gunderson, 2008; see also the April 2009 issue of *Educational Leadership*):

- Consider learning a few words in the student's first or preferred language. Time-of-day references, please, thank you, and greetings go a

long way toward breaking the ice. The core functional words or directions provided in the student's primary language will help the English learners better navigate new school environments (Agirdag, 2009).

- When using vocabulary from the primary language, provide the English equivalent so that learners can form linguistic connections.
- When a student attempts to communicate in English—stop everything. Give the person time and listen carefully. When asking questions, provide ample processing time. Incorporate one word responses, pictures/drawings, and real objects in the process of asking and answering questions.
- Work with a translator to identify the student's home environments. After learning family members' names and ages, remember them; every conversation goes more smoothly when it is tied to a personal topic. The human brain is wired to learn languages better and remember longer when it is presented in narratives formats and tied to personal experience.
- Provide ample opportunities to be exposed to rich English language environment. Second language learners have more difficulties understanding another non-native speaker than native English speakers because it requires compromise of two different accents rather than one of their own.

Learning to comprehend English spoken through an accent is more art than science, but well worth the effort. Listen for the rhythm and cadence of accented English—it is akin to hearing a new form of music for the first time, with its new rhythmic conventions and melodies. Counselors and teachers who remain patient and persistent in developing their own listening skills will experience great rewards in connecting with English language learners.

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